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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study investigated the types of conflict elementary principals encounter and the behaviors of the principals that led to successful or unsuccessful results of those conflict situations. The Critical Incident Technique was used as the means of gathering data for this study. Data were gathered from 32 principals in a midwestern school district. Principals were asked to describe incidents with high levels of conflict that led to satisfactory or unsatisfactory outcomes. Fifty-eight separate incidents were described, in three categories: (1) conflict with parents; (2) conflict with students; and (3) conflict with staff. Each principal was then asked to describe the actual behaviors they employed in dealing with the situation. A total of 273 behaviors were identified by these principals. Examples of behaviors leading to successful outcomes were listening, gathering lots of information, and meeting in a neutral area. Examples of behaviors leading to unsuccessful outcomes were making assumptions, authoritarian decision-making, and inappropriate meeting arrangements. The findings of this study have implications for practicing elementary administrators, particularly those in their first year or two. The study holds the promise for contributing to the administrative tools that principals can use to cope with conflict. (RT)

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The Solomonic Pathway: Critical Incidents in the Elementary School Principalship

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Running Head: Pathway

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Abstract

This qualitative study investigated the types of conflict elementary principals encounter and the behaviors of the principals that led to successful or unsuccessful results of those conflict situations. The Critical Incident Technique (Flanagan, 1954; Bryant, 1998) was used as the means of gathering data for this study. Data were gathered from 32 elementary principals in a mid-western school district. Principals were asked to describe incidents with high levels of conflict that led to satisfactory or unsatisfactory outcomes. Fifty-eight separate incidents were described. The incidents fell into three categories: 1) conflict with parents; 2) conflict with students; and 3) conflict with staff. Each principal was then asked to describe the actual behaviors they employed in dealing with the situation. A total of 273 behaviors were identified by these principals. Examples of behaviors leading to successful outcomes were: listening, gathering lots of information, meeting in a neutral area; examples of behaviors leading to unsuccessful outcomes were: making assumptions, authoritarian decision making, inappropriate meeting arrangements.

The findings of this study have implications for practicing elementary administrators, particularly those in their first year or two.

Introduction

Often school administrators are called upon to find a solution to conflict. And conflict events can be the most emotionally taxing of all the aspects of the administrative job. Unlike Solomon who could arrive at a way to resolve conflict in a kingly and arbitrary manner, the elementary principal must resolve conflict in a world full of complexity and uncertainty. The purpose of this study was to examine how elementary principals handle conflict. The Critical Incident Technique was used to identify themes in two categories of behaviors: 1) behaviors of principals when a conflict was handled well and led to a perceived positive outcome and 2) behaviors of principals when conflict was not handled well and led to perceived negative outcomes. The behaviors identified should help practicing and aspiring principals better manage conflict.

Theoretical Framework

Conflict is a routine part of professional experience for school principals. Demands are placed upon principals to manage and lead people of dissimilar backgrounds, socioeconomic status, and value systems who have different wants and needs (Strodl & Johnson, 1994; Wirt & Christovich, 1989). Adjudicating the demands that come from many different quarters can place great stress on the principal.

In a study of how principals spend and use their time, researchers concluded that principals have a heavy work load, "handling the continuous actions demands of administration" (Kmetz & Willower, 1982, p. 77). Martin and Willower (1981) also found that principals had a long work week. Principals performed such a large number of tasks that principals would often exhibit "Polychronics" behavior—doing two things simultaneously (Kmetz & Willower, 1982). We now often label this behavior as "multi-tasking." In an environment full of competing demands monitored by an administrator with a constant barrage of events needing attention, conflict is inevitable. When Hill (1993) categorized principal's time, she found that "only business exceeded the amount

of time the principal spent on conflict" p. 7). Lippitt (1982) found principals to spend approximately 24 % of their time dealing with conflict.

Conflict can occur at any time and with anyone. When interviewing experienced principals, Reisert (1992) found that 43 % of experienced elementary school principals would advise prospective principals to learn how to control stress, handle pressures, and manage conflict. This response percentage was higher than any other response category, including those of "understanding the demands on time," "making timely decisions," "keeping current and informed, " "being a good communicator," "being flexible and willing to compromise," and "having goals and objectives that place students first."

The opportunity for conflict always exists. Conflict management is essential for a principal to be effective. Principals need to understand the behaviors in conflict management that led to both effective and dysfunctional outcomes.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to identify the behaviors of selected elementary school administrators relative to the handling of conflict situations. The Critical Incident Technique was used to identify constellations of behaviors in two categories: 1) behaviors of principals when a conflict was handled well and led to a perceived positive outcome, and 2) behaviors of principals when conflict was not handled well and led to perceived negative outcomes The behaviors identified should help practicing principals better manage conflict and should afford aspiring principals a window open to practce.

Methods

For this study, data were gathered using the Critical Incident Technique (CIT). The CIT establishes a framework within which to gather concrete descriptions of behavior that are associated with either highly successful or unsuccessful outcomes. The logic of the CIT differs from more conventional statistical approaches in that it seeks data from the tails of the normal distribution, i.e. the very unusual, as opposed to capturing behavioral attributes through measures of central tendency (Bryant, 1998). Using this technique, information about conflict was collected from interviews with elementary

principals. Thirty-two principals were interviewed and 58 usable incidents were collected.

Results

The 58 conflict incidents described by the principals were arrayed into three categories: 1) Conflicts with parents-21 incidents; 2) Conflicts with students-20 incidents; and 3) Conflicts with staff-17 incidents. Within each category the conflicts were determined by the principal to have ended with an effective or unsatisfactory resolution.

Table 1: Number of Successful Conflicts and Unsuccessful Conflicts in Each Category

	Parent Conflict	Student Conflict	Staff Conflict
Successful Incidents	11	12	
Unsuccessful Incidents	10	8	8
Total Number Of Incidents	21	20	17

In each category (parent conflict, student conflict, staff conflict) behaviors were described that led to successful or unsuccessful outcomes as perceived by the elementary principal.

Parent Conflict

In the area of "parent conflict", four categories of conflict emerged: 1) parents acting in support of their child, 2) parents who disagree with policy, 3) parents vs. teacher, and 4) angry parents.

1) Parents acting in support of their child

Successful Resolution: parents concerned about special education services for child, parent upset with educational program designed for her son, parent accused principal of targeting her children for fighting, because they were children of color, and guardian upset because child was not permitted to attend field trip.

Unsuccessful Resolution: parent upset with consequences given to child, parent confronted principal about situation with child, and parent (who is also a teacher) expressed unhappiness with situation.

2) Parents who disagree with policy

Successful Resolution: principal reported to parents at meeting about the staffing cuts/decisions that had been made

Unsuccessful Resolution: Parent confronted principal about school policy, PTO President upset because she could not park in a specific spot in the morning, and mother wanted to observe classroom (now) for a university class; principal explained that was not appropriate at this time.

3) Parents vs. teacher

In the parent vs. teacher theme, the three conflicts described were all viewed as having successful results.

Successful: parent accused teacher of showing favoritism, parents started petition to fire teacher, and student reported to parent that teacher had made fun of student in class.

4) Angry parents

Successful: Social services made a visit to the home after the school had called with a concern about child, parent raised voice/got angry at meeting, and parent group got confrontational with principal.

Unsuccessful: Parents arguing/fighting at bus stops, confronted mother about abuse of child by mother's significant other, parent threatened staff/made accusations at meeting, and parent called superintendent with concerns about principal.

One unsuccessful conflict situation in the area of Angry parents was that of a principal who confronted a mother about abuse of a child by the mother's significant other. We provide the transcript of that principal's description below:

> *We had a family move in to us from out of state....little to our knowledge, we thought it was a mother and father. But it was a mother and a significant other. And the significant other played a major role in the family, but had no rights or responsibilities, we didn't know that. Because the records have indicated on the certificate, on the reference to the father, there was no name on there. So we assumed there was no father, but there was a father at this time and they said that they were both fully in charge....And there was more than one child, more in this family. But one specific child always seemed to have some problems—came late to school, um, always behind, never alert, and so forth....Well, the problem, one is that we continually talked to the father about this, whom we assumed was the...instead of spending time with the mother. And the mother was busy on the road, out of town and so we assumed that this was the arrangement that they had. And to summarize, there were a variety of things that happened that should have been indicators that this significant other person was abusing the child at home.*
>
> *And, the, the mother, after confronted with it, would not believe it, also....and I really blew it....if I would have initially contacted the mother, spent time with her, found out more about the family.... Eventually the father was charged with doing this. But all during the process, I had...I should have gone more in to depth with the child, listened more...And should have gone back and found out more that the father was not involved in the home. But I didn't. And there was a case that a child suffered because of my not involved in her...*
>
> *That's a story that sticks in my mind vividly, because no child should suffer because of adults, ever.*

Student Conflict

In the area of "student conflict", three themes emerged: 1)student confrontation fighting, 2) inappropriate language/touch, and 3) grades.

1) Student confrontation/fighting

Successful: Four girls fighting on the playground, one student went after another student and pushed him down, one student assaulted another student, fight on the playground, student in fight at recess, first grade student attacked by a sixth grade student, fight on the bus, two students fighting/behaving inappropriately on a field trip.

Unsuccessful: Four boys in fight on playground, girl severely scratched four boys, student in fight, and student suspended for fighting.

In one conflict that ended unsuccessfully, one principal described the situation:

> *I'll never mend fences with the mother involved. But it was a late Friday afternoon. School dismissed at 2:45, and I had at 2:30 four boys that were scratched severely. Their scratches were bad enough that if they came to school that way, we would have reported child abuse. One of their classmates, a little girl, scratched them and it was the worst scratches that I've ever seen...I made a conscious decision to tell the boys that yes, the girl had scratched them. They had been scratched severely , and there would be severe consequences...then I needed to call the little girl's mother and I couldn't get a hold of her. So I called the person that was on the emergency number to call who was her aunt. But I had failed to think about this aunt being her father's sister, and the mother and dad had divorced. So there were hard feelings there....*
> *And then the mother came in and was very demanding...I said, "I will check further on this, and I'll get back to you."...So I checked, I called all the boys at home that afternoon....And I was going to call the mother the next morning. I walked in at 7:00 the next morning, and I had a three-page, single-spaced letter written with a copy to everybody...It was probably the nastiest parent letter I've ever received. Principal 21 later thought that the conflict would have been more successful if:*
> *I would have taken more time. It wasn't a life threatening situation...I think probably, as an administrator, if they have the luxury of the time, you should take it.*

2) Inappropriate language/touch

Successful: Student inappropriately touching another student, student used inappropriate language on the playground, and student wrote inappropriate note to teacher.

Unsuccessful: Caucasian child made racial slur against biracial child, student made inappropriate comment about a boy and girl in the classroom, and two students (on a weekend) misused the telephone through the use of inappropriate language, leaving a message on another student's answering machine

3) Grades

Only one conflict situation fell into this category, and the result was unsuccessful.

Unsuccessful: Student received poor grades on a report card

Staff Conflict

Four areas were viewed to be subcategories under the category of conflicts labeled as staff conflicts. The four subcategories were : 1) staffing, 2) performance issues, 3) inter-quarrelling, and 4) policies.

1) Staffing

Successful: Principal shared the reduction in staff information, and principal told teachers they were going to multi-age classrooms the next year due to a reduction in staff.

There were no identified unsuccessful incidents relative to staffing issues.

2) Performance Issues

Successful: Teachers not happy with custodian's performance, teachers concerned about performance of another teacher, principal confronted teacher with appraisal/performance issues, principal confronted teacher with performance issues (The teacher had received a traumatic brain injury in a car accident and had returned to teaching.), and student teacher reported cooperating teacher was being too critical.

Principal 24 faced a very difficult conflict situation with a staff member, and, yet, the principal considered the result to be successful.

> *I had a teacher who had, um, was involved in an accident and really had some major brain damage, and she had come back to work after being out a year at the school where she'd been for ten years. And the people there knew her. So they noticed right away that there were some, she was having some trouble with her teaching. But because she was their friend, they literally covered for her. Well, in time, administration changed and situations changed, and so she had a reduction in staff situation. So she came to my building as a music teacher. Well, um, all I knew at that point was that she had been in the district all that time and had been a good music teacher. Um, heard rumblings that she wasn't quite as good as she had used to be...And, um, gradually, there became, there were more*

signs. So one day a teacher came in and she was very upset....We worked through it...Well, in the course of that discussion, some other teachers then came to me, and we had to address the concerns of other teachers. Come to find out, she had not even been writing her own lesson plans, her husband, who was a physics teacher...had been writing her lesson plans. She had lost all short-term memory. She was doing everything from what she could remember before the accident. And as I was in the classroom I began to observe how she would teach the same thing to kindergartners as to sixth graders....But, I had always been honest with her about the concerns and she always appreciated that and even to the point where we got to a point where we had asked her to have some tests redone. So I'm sitting in the office of the neurologist...She had agreed to sign a release, so we could get the result of the test. The doctor was reluctant to give those to me. And he said, "What will happen if I don't?" And I said, "Well, then, I'll have to pursue due process for termination." He turned to her and said, "(Name), you can't do it. The tests show that you lost what you had in terms of short term memory and being able to react and do the things that teachers have to do." And, you know, it was so sad, but at the same time, it was very much a situation where if I hadn't been very honest with her and truthful with her and sharing about the concerns, I think she was able to put that in perspective a little bit. But the doctor and then her husband were able to help her appreciate the fact that this wasn't a vendetta, this was about what was best for her and also best for the children. This was just something she couldn't do.

Unsuccessful: Principal confronted teacher about inappropriate professional behavior, principal confronted teachers about instructional/grading policies, principal confronted staff member about schedule, and principal confronted two teachers who were not planning appropriately.

3) Inter-quarrelling

Successful: Principal held meeting to discuss trust-building in school and two para-educators at school quarrelling about spending money on a teacher event.

Unsuccessful: Principal didn't set up correct volleyball net for volleyball coach and staff members quarrelling about the planning of an activity.

4) Policies

Unsuccessful: Principal told staff at meeting they could not keep kids after school, and principal asked staff member about personal issues.

Behavioral Data

Above we have presented the incidents identified by our subjects. In this section we focus on the reported behaviors that principals recalled as descriptive of what they

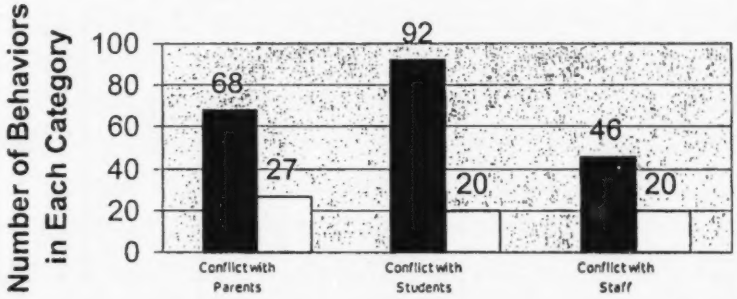
did. As a research guide, The Critical Incident Technique calls for the identification of explicit behaviors (Flanagan, 1954; Bryant, 1998). The most accurate way to gather examples of behaviors is through participant observation. However, it has become common to ask the participants in a critical event to discuss what they did in the way of their behaviors. This was the practice of the researchers in gathering data from the elementary principals in this study. We asked principals to tell us exactly what they did during the course of the conflict event.

Reported behaviors were divided into the following categories: 1) Conflict with parents – principal behaviors that led to successful and unsuccessful results; 2) Conflict with students – principal behaviors that led to successful and 4) unsuccessful results; and 3) Conflict with staff – principal behaviors that led to successful and) unsuccessful results. We ended up with six categories in all.

Into these six categories, all of the behaviors described by principals were placed. A total of 273 behaviors were extracted from the interviews.

Table 2 introduces the number of behaviors categorized.

Table 2: Principal Behaviors That Led to Successful or Unsuccessful Conflict Results



It should not be surprising that these principals looked back into the past and found more examples of behaviors associated with success than with failure. Most psychological studies looking at how we restructure our past experiences find that we tend to suppress the unpleasant in favor of the pleasant. These subjects provided no exception to that normal tendency.

Conflict with parents – principal behaviors that led to successful results

1) Gather/provide information. This category included such behaviors as giving more information to parents, givng factual account of situation, gathering all information needed, and documenting the situation.

2) Intentional choices for meeting location. This included such behaviors as: met in library, invited parent into office.

3) Physical/verbal gestures. This included such behaviors as shakikng hands, talking about something else first, making eye contact, keeping voice calm and quiet, and repeating the story/summarizing what had been said.

4) Policy/law reminder. This included such behaviors as discussing district guidelines/policies and reminding parents of laws pertaining to child abuse

5) Follow-up. This included such behaviors as following up with a meeting and writing a follow-up letter.

6) Positives discussed. This included such behaviors as discussed positives about student and making positive statements.

7) Set guidelines. This included such behaviors as firmly setting guidelines for meeting.

8) Met with individuals/groups. This included such behaviors as called a meeting with all those involved and met with parents.

9) Timing. This included such behaviors as didn't decide on a consequence immediately, shared information early, and told parent needed more time to gather facts.

10) Listening. This included such behaviors as listened attentively while parent was talking..

11) Empowering others. This included such behaviors as asking for parent input and gave parent power in decision making.

Conflict with students – principal behaviors that led to successful results

In this category, there were 92 behaviors described by the principals. These 92 behaviors were divided into 11 subcategories. The subcategories included: gather/providing information, intentional choices for meeting location, physical/verbal gestures, contacted parent, utilizing outside sources, developing a plan, setting guidelines, meeting with individuals/group, timing, listening, and empowering others.

While this section is about conflict with students, the majority of the behaviors listed deal with how the principal worked through the students' conflict situations with parents.

1) Gather/provide information. This included such behaviors as researched/talked with students, talked to witnesses, and took notes/documented.
2) Intentional Choices for meeting location. This included such behaviors as meeting in conference room or classroom.
3) Physical/verbal gestures. This included such behaviors as letting parents state concerns first, keeping calm voice, and paralleling the parent' sense of urgency.
4) Contacted parent. This included such behaviors as meeting with parents and calling parents.
5) Utilized outside sources. This included such behaviors as hiring a consultant, calling police, and inviting in a therapist.
6) Developed a plan. This included such behaviors as designing a good behavior plan, and developed a plan to make the situation better.
7) Set guidelines. This included such behaviors as setting time limits for meeting and setting limits for discussion (no profanity)
8) Met with individuals/group. This included such behaviors as meeting with all parties involved, meeting with parents, meeting with student, meeting as a team.
9) Timing. This included such behaviors as giving enough time for meeting, taking time to make decision, and spending much time on conflict.
10) Empowering others. This included such behaviors as having students decide consequence and asking for suggestions.

These were specific behaviors recalled by these principals that they saw as leading to a successful resolution of the incident,.

<u>Conflict with staff – principal behaviors that led to successful results</u>

Principals were also able to recall behaviors associated with successful resolution of staff conflicts.

1) Gather/provide information: This category included such behaviors as investigating, asking probing questions, and increasing written communication.
2) Physical/verbal gestures: This included such behaviors as staying consistent, using a sense of humor, and playing calming music.
3) Followed-up: This included such behaviors as following up with staff members.
4) Utilized outside resources: This included such behaviors as contacting outside resources and bringing in an impartial 3rd party.
5) Developed a plan: This included such behaviors as developing a plan and implementing a plan.
6) Set guidelines: This included such behaviors as setting guidelines for meeting and setting guidelines for what is negotiable.

7) Met with individuals/group: This included such behaviors as talking to/working with teacher, meeting with all parties invoived, and observing teacher.

8) Timing: This included such behaviors as gaving wait time and moving forward with change slowly.

9) Listening: This included such behaviors as listening with body language demonstrating attention.

10) Empowered others: This included such behaviors as asking for input and giving responsibility to all involved.

Many of the behaviors listed in this category are the same as/similar to the items listed in previous categories. The one item that seemed to stick out a bit more in this area was the principal who "played calming music" while dealing with a conflict. Principal 19 reports that sometimes

> *A staff member is...just very angry. They're in their brain stem, you've got to give them time to refocus, to calm down, to get the blood pressure decreased. So that they can think more rationally, they can feel more comfortable. So both of those play an important role. I have on the door for students, and, you know, probably could use it for adults. I have the three parts of the brain, the cerebral cortex, the lymph system, and the brainstem...and my only response is, "I understand you're really upset right now...And I usually play calming music in the background and then they can sit and calm down. Because nobody's going to win if we talk about it when we're all angry.*

This technique was different than any strategy any of the other principals used, but for this principal, this particular strategy seemed to work well.

Conflict with parents – behaviors that led to unsuccessful results

Out of the three areas that led to unsuccessful results (parents, students, and staff), the area with parents held the most behaviors – 27. These 27 behaviors were placed into 8 subcategories.

1) Principal's inaccurate assumptions: This included such behaviors as should have researched personal record of parent's significant other, should have told parents more information, and should have let mother explain why she was calling.

2) One-sided decision-making: This included such behaviors as acted too much in an authoritarian manner, took too strong of a stand with parents, should have accessed outside services earlier, and started conversation with sarcasm.

3) Emotional reaction: This included such behaviors as hung up on parent phone call, raised voice, and voice quivered.

4) Did not set guidelines: This included such behaviors as should have ended meeting/set parameters.

5) Unsuitable meeting: This included such behaviors as should have met with parent rather than called and should have had everyone meet together.

6) Inappropriate location: This included such behaviors as talked to student in the hall, not in the office.

7) Principal did not listen: This included such behaviors as should have listened more to student.

8) Principal's ineffective use of time: This included such behaviors as let the conflict continue on for too long, sat and listened too long, and took phone call during lunch duty.

Another factor that determines how a conflict will be managed is the personality of the principal. While some principals will give the conflict much time, other principals believe the conflict situation should move rather quickly to management/resolution. When one subject had a group of parents come in with a petition to fire a teacher, the principal did not feel it was appropriate to give them a forum in which to present this petition.

> *"And I darn near went through the ceiling. And I could feel my blood pressure going up. And I have low blood pressure!...they wanted this teacher out of here in two weeks, and I explained things like due process and that the teacher was competent, which he was. They just didn't like him. Those parents were out, not only for him, but they were really, I still believe they were a little bit after me, too. Um, they were a group of parents that were used to running the school. And I had done some things that they didn't like. And this particular teacher happened to be kind of a free spirit...and I hired him, and they didn't like that....they wanted the teacher out of here in two weeks. And I can still remember my exact words were, 'There's no way in hell that's going to happen.'"*

The interesting note about this principal is that he explained that he didn't really like conflict, although he knew he sometimes did some things that actually fueled a conflict.

> *"I don't thrive on it. But when I first started talking, I said I don't like to lose. And I don't like to have my intelligence questioned. I don't like to have my capability of running a school questioned. I take it very, very personally."*

The phrase "running a school" captures one element of school administration that appears to sometimes trip up administrators. When principals felt that they were in charge and able to make unilateral decisions, they often exacerbated conflict; when principals were inclined to focus on resolving the issue, conflict was reduced.

Conflicts with students – behaviors that led to unsuccessful results

In this subcategory, 20 behaviors were shared as leading to unsuccessful results with students. The 20 behaviors were placed into 7 subcategories.

1) Emotional reaction: This included such behaviors as voice got higher and louder, got emotional/defensive, and walked away from parent.
2) Lack of focus: This included such behaviors as did not stick to one specific incident when talking to parents, should have removed student from meeting, and needed to be more assertive in my statements.
3) Did not utilize outside resources: This included such behaviors as shou'd have had someone from the student services division help.
4) Did not set guidelines: This included such behaviors as did not set any parameters for the conversation and did not set time limits on conflict.
5) Unwise communication skills: This included such behaviors as called parent rather than meeting with her.
6) Inappropriate location: This included such behaviors as allowed discussion in a public forum.
7) Principal's ineffective use of time: This included such behaviors as too much time elapsed between conflict and meeting and should have taken more time before deciding consequence.

Several of the behaviors listed under unsuccessful results were gathered in the area of emotional reaction. The principals were aware this was happening, but they were sometimes caught off guard, and once they made a mistake, they knew they had done it.

> *"And I'm walking in from...I do bus duty at the end of the day, and I'm walking in from bus duty, and she just got me right when I entered the door. I mean she just let me have it in front of God and everybody. And I wouldn't back down, because, and this is where I made a mistake is I let my emotion get into this and it was my wrong emotion. I got defensive because of where she hit me up...if I would have been in my office and she would have come in to my office and shut my door and screamed and yelled at me, then that would have been okay. But since she did it in front of everybody, I was very embarrassed by it, and the my defenses came up, and I didn't back down."*

Conflicts with staff – behaviors that led to unsuccessful results

In this final area, there were 20 behaviors listed. The 20 behaviors were placed into 4 subcategories.

1) Principal's inaccurate assumptions: This included such behaviors as misinterpreted professional level of other participants and spoke with one person too much before speaking with all individuals involved.
2) One-sided decision-making: This included such behaviors as should not have been so forceful, two administrators stood up during announcement to show more emphasis, and did too much talking at meeting.

3) Principal's ineffective use of time: This included such behaviors as didn't step in soon enough, let the situation drag on for too long, and didn't step in soon enough.

4) Unwise communication skills: This included such behaviors as wrote vague note of concern, needed more precise language, and lost focus of discussion/conflict.

An interesting finding to note is the fact that many of the same themes for subcategories used in the successful behaviors area were the same categories that were used in the unsuccessful behaviors area. The difference was that the principal didn't utilize these behaviors when the result was not successful.

The majority of the principals were very open in their responses, however, it was much more difficult for most principals to determine exactly what behaviors they exhibited that led to an unsuccessful result. This may account for the lower number of behaviors in the "behaviors that led to unsuccessful results" area.

Many principals mentioned that sometimes conflict takes on a life of its own. While a principal may be handling a conflict perfectly, the end result may still not be successful, and, when a principal happens to handle a conflict poorly, there still may be a successful result.

The critical incidents that were shared by principals led to a summary list of behaviors. Figure 1 shows a summary of principal behaviors when a conflict was managed successfully.

Figure 1: Summary of Principal Behaviors When Conflicts Were Managed Successfully

- Gathered/Provided Information
- Intentional Choices for Meeting Location
- Physical/Verbal Gestures
- Policy/Law Reminders
- Followed-Up
- Positives Discussed
- Set Guidelines
- Met With Individuals/Group
- Timing
- Listening

- Empowering Others
- Utilized Outside Resources
- Developed a Plan
-

Figure 2 shows a summary of principal behaviors when a conflict was managed successfully.

Figure 2: Summary of Principal Behaviors When Conflicts Were Managed Unsuccessfully

- Principal's Inaccurate Assumptions
- One-Sided Decision-Making
- Emotional Reaction
- Did Not Set Guidelines
- Principal's Ineffective Use of Time
- Lack of Focus
- Unwise Communication Skills

It was much harder for principals to describe behaviors that led to unsuccessful outcomes. This is apparent in the results – there were 273 behaviors shared that led to successful results, and 67 behaviors shared that led to unsuccessful results. We do not believe that the principals were unwilling to share their behaviors that led to unsuccessful results. Rather, it was just much harder to pinpoint those behaviors. There were several cases where the principals would describe a conflict that had ended unsuccessfully, but the behaviors they described were all behaviors that would have normally led to a conflict with a successful result.

To further emphasize the fact that the principals were willingly sharing information, many of the principals mentioned how it was easier to describe a conflict situation in which there was an unsuccessful result, because those are the conflicts that "stick in your mind." While the principals did not have difficulty describing a conflict in which there was a successful result, they spoke about how the conflicts with the unsuccessful results seemed clearer to them. This belief counters what we noted earlier as human tendency to remember the pleasant and forget the unpleasant.

Implications

Conflict among those who inhabit schools is not pathological. Conflict is to be expected as individuals with different needs and different understandings cross paths. It usually falls to the school administrator to find or design a process to resolve the conflict. Yet, school administrators, unlike Solomon, do not enjoy kingly privileges. Indeed, when they do behave as if they were the sole judges of an event, they usually exacerbate the situation.

In contrast, the principal who remains alert to how his or her behaviors can influence the successful resolution of a conflict will, in most instances, be better served than the principal who plunges thoughtlessly along. Conflict is a reality that can be managed in order to increase the probability of a positive outcome. This study holds the promise for contributing to the administrative tools that principals can use to cope with conflict.

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